

# DESIGN TOOLS

## TO SUPPORT COMMUNICATIONS



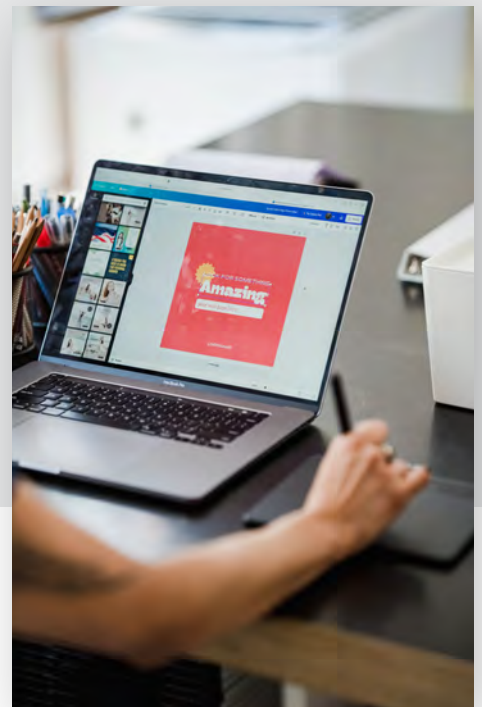
# --- SUMMARY

# A QUICK-START GUIDE

You do not need to be a professional designer to create clear, attractive, and trustworthy communications. The tools below are free or offer strong free versions, and they are especially useful for school districts, community organizations, public agencies, and small teams with limited communications capacity.

When using free design tools and resources, it is important to pay attention to data privacy, copyright, and licensing. This is especially true for photos, graphics, and fonts, which may be easy to find online but are not always free to use, modify, or distribute.

Some of the design tools shared in this document include AI features. When using AI tools to support school communications, avoid uploading personally identifiable or sensitive student information, including names, records, photos, or details that could reveal a student's identity. These tools can be useful for brainstorming, drafting, simplifying, or revising messages, but users should anonymize examples and avoid entering sensitive or confidential information. District leaders should ensure that any AI-assisted communication reflects local policy, professional judgment, and the district's standards for accuracy, privacy, and public trust.



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# START WITH THE MESSAGE

Before choosing colors, images, or templates, answer three questions:

**Who is the audience?**

Parents? Staff? Community members? Elected officials? Business partners?

**What do they need to know?**

Keep the message focused on one main idea.

**What do you want them to do?**

Attend a meeting? Read more? Share feedback? Support an initiative? Visit a website?

**Quick tip:** If the reader only remembers one thing, what should it be?



# FREE DESIGN TOOLS

## Canva

**Best for:** Flyers, social media graphics, presentations, newsletters, infographics, one-pagers

**Link:** [canva.com](https://canva.com)

**Why it helps:** Canva has easy drag-and-drop templates. Search for “school flyer,” “community update,” “newsletter,” “infographic,” or “social media post.”

## Adobe Express

**Best for:** Social media posts, simple videos, flyers, branded graphics

**Link:** [adobe.com/express](https://adobe.com/express)

**Why it helps:** Adobe Express offers free editable templates and is a good option for quick, polished graphics.

## Google Slides

**Best for:** Simple one-pagers, handouts, meeting slides, printable PDFs

**Link:** [slides.google.com](https://slides.google.com)

**Why it helps:** Many people already know how to use it. Create an 8.5 x 11 page, add text boxes and images, then download as a PDF.

# FREE IMAGE AND ICON RESOURCES

## Unsplash

**Best for:** Free high-quality photos

**Link:** [unsplash.com](https://unsplash.com)

**Use it for:** Background images or general visuals. Avoid images that feel too polished or disconnected from your local community.

## The Noun Project

**Best for:** Simple icons

**Link:** [thenounproject.com](https://thenounproject.com)

**Use it for:** Icons that represent ideas like transportation, school, money, family, safety, or community.

## Google Material Symbols

**Best for:** Free, simple, consistent icons

**Link:** [fonts.google.com/icons](https://fonts.google.com/icons)

**Use it for:** Clean icons that work well in flyers, websites, and presentations.

# FREE WRITING AND CLARITY RESOURCES

## PlainLanguage.gov

**Best for:** Offers guidance for public-facing communication and tips for making public communications easier to read

**Link:** [plainlanguage.gov](https://www.plainlanguage.gov)

**Use it for:** Rewriting long or technical explanations into clear, direct language. Learning how to organize information, write clearly, and design content for understanding.

**Quick tip:** Use short sentences, familiar words, headings, bullets, and active voice.

# ACCESSIBILITY AND READABILITY CHECKS

## WebAIM Contrast Checker

**Best for:** Making sure text is easy to read

**Link:** [webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker](https://webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker)

**Use it for:** Checking whether your text color has enough contrast against the background.

## Hemingway Editor

**Best for:** Simplifying writing

**Link:** [hemingwayapp.com](https://hemingwayapp.com)

**Use it for:** Finding sentences that are too long or hard to read.

## A SIMPLE DESIGN CHECKLIST

Before sharing a communication, ask:

- ☐ Is the main message obvious in five seconds?
- ☐ Is there one clear action step?
- ☐ Are the most important details easy to find?
- ☐ Is the language clear and direct?
- ☐ Are there too many fonts, colors, or images?
- ☐ Can the text be read easily on a phone?
- ☐ Does the design feel trustworthy and connected to the community?
- ☐ Did someone outside the project review it before it was shared?

## RECOMMENDED STARTING TEMPLATES

Try searching these terms in Canva, Adobe Express, or Google Slides:

- Community update flyer
- School newsletter
- Budget explainer
- Event invitation
- Public meeting reminder
- Infographic
- Social media announcement
- Frequently asked questions
- One-page report
- Timeline graphic

The Ohio Department of Education and Workforce also offers several helpful communication planning templates.

| TOOL                                  | LINK                                                                                                           | BEST USE                                                                  | WHY IT IS USEFUL                                                                                                                                                                     |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Piktochart                            | <a href="http://piktochart.com">piktochart.com</a>                                                             | Infographics, reports, one-pagers                                         | Good for turning complex information into visuals. Strong option for budget explainers, survey results, timelines, or “why this matters” pages.                                      |
| Infogram                              | <a href="http://infogram.com">infogram.com</a>                                                                 | Charts, maps, interactive data visuals                                    | Helpful when districts or organizations want to communicate data, survey results, demographics, or funding information visually.                                                     |
| Pexels                                | <a href="http://pexels.com">pexels.com</a>                                                                     | Free stock photos and royalty free images                                 | Reliable source for free images that can be used to enhance your communications                                                                                                      |
| Affinity Suite                        | <a href="http://affinity.studio">affinity.studio</a>                                                           | Professional software suite that includes photo editing and page layouts. | A subscription-free alternative to Adobe's creative applications.                                                                                                                    |
| Smore                                 | <a href="http://www.smore.com">www.smore.com</a>                                                               | Developing weekly or monthly newsletters                                  | Helpful for developing newsletter and includes features like translation and built-in accessible templates.                                                                          |
| Flourish                              | <a href="http://flourish.studio">flourish.studio</a>                                                           | Data stories, interactive charts, maps                                    | More advanced than Canva, but still template-based. Useful for public-facing data stories.                                                                                           |
| Datawrapper                           | <a href="http://datawrapper.de">datawrapper.de</a>                                                             | Charts and maps                                                           | Excellent for clean, readable charts. Good for showing enrollment, funding, survey responses, or comparisons without making the design look cluttered.                               |
| Microsoft Designer (AI)               | <a href="http://designer.microsoft.com">designer.microsoft.com</a>                                             | Quick social media graphics and flyers                                    | Easy tool for generating clean design ideas, especially if users already work in Microsoft 365.                                                                                      |
| VistaCreate                           | <a href="http://create.vista.com">create.vista.com</a>                                                         | Social media posts, flyers, announcements                                 | Similar to Canva, with many templates for quick communication products.                                                                                                              |
| Accessible Web Color Contrast Checker | <a href="http://accessibleweb.com/color-contrast-checker">accessibleweb.com/color-contrast-checker</a>         | Accessibility check                                                       | Essential for making sure text and background colors are readable.                                                                                                                   |
| Remove.bg                             | <a href="http://remove.bg">remove.bg</a>                                                                       | Low cost resource for removing image backgrounds                          | Very useful for cleaning up headshots, logos, or object photos before placing them in a flyer.                                                                                       |
| TinyPNG                               | <a href="http://tinypng.com">tinypng.com</a>                                                                   | Compressing images                                                        | Helps reduce large image files before putting them into newsletters, websites, or PDFs.                                                                                              |
| Google Fonts                          | <a href="http://fonts.google.com">fonts.google.com</a>                                                         | Free fonts                                                                | Good for finding readable, professional fonts that can be used consistently across materials.                                                                                        |
| Bitly                                 | <a href="http://bitly.com">bitly.com</a>                                                                       | Create short links and generate QR Codes                                  | Helpful when printed materials need a short, memorable link and generating a QR code for linking flyers to surveys, registration forms, public notices, videos, or budget documents. |
| Fontpair                              | <a href="http://fontpair.co">fontpair.co</a>                                                                   | Font combinations                                                         | Helps non-designers choose fonts that look good together.                                                                                                                            |
| DaVinci Resolve                       | <a href="http://blackmagicdesign.com/products/davinciresolve">blackmagicdesign.com/products/davinciresolve</a> | Video editing software for professionals                                  | An industry standard video editing software. While having a paid version, the free version is still feature rich. A free Adobe Premiere alternative for professionals on a budget.   |

Disclaimer: The Miami CREAEd communications toolkit is a publicly available educational resource created to support communication planning and stakeholder engagement. The views, examples, and tools included are intended to promote thoughtful communication practices and do not represent legal advice, official policy guidance, or endorsement of an organization, statement, or political position. Miami University, Miami CREAEd, and project contributors do not assume responsibility for how toolkit materials are adapted or used in specific local contexts. Users are encouraged to review all communications for accuracy, accessibility, appropriateness, and compliance with applicable laws, regulations, and organizational policies. Users may not use any of Miami's trademarks, service marks, logos, trade names, names, or brand indicia (collectively, "Miami Marks") without first obtaining the written consent of Miami's Office of Trademarks and Licensing. The use of the Miami CREAEd communications toolkit, and all related documents, agreements, or exhibits, and all disputes and other matters arising out of or relating to the toolkit, whether sounding in contract, tort, statute, or otherwise, shall be governed by, and construed in accordance with, the laws of the State of Ohio, without giving effect to any jurisdiction's conflict of laws provisions. Miami's liability shall be subject in all cases to the immunities and limitations of the Ohio Court of Claims Act codified in Chapter 2743 of the Ohio Revised Code and as provided in Ohio R.C. 9.86 and 9.87, as amended. Nothing in the Miami CREAEd communications toolkit shall be construed as a waiver of the sovereign or qualified immunity of Miami, Miami's employees, and/or the State of Ohio.